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ABSTRACT

Issues in the national school choice debate are examined in this paper. Proponents of school choice have included the last two Republican Presidents, the Education Commission of the States, and many state governors and business community leaders. Gallup polls conducted during 1989-91 indicate that school choice (among public schools) is a popular concept among parents. Opponents fear a lack of government commitment for funding, inequitable funding, and the creation of unequal schools. They also cite research findings indicating that parental choice is often based on parental convenience rather than on academic opportunities. An analysis of articles on choice in educational journals from 1982-91 ("Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature" and ERIC) shows the extent to which choice has become an issue within the educational community. The proliferation of journal coverage on choice raises the question of why the topic receives so much continued attention if there are so many problems. It is suggested that choice may only be a popular slogan with little impact on the delivery of education. It is recommended that options with greater chances of renewing the American educational system be discussed. Two figures are included. (Contains 19 references.) (LMI)

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Oh, For Lake Wobegon: Where School Choice is Not Discussed

Larry D. Dorrell

Although school choice may not be a topic of discussion for the citizens of Lake Wobegon where all the children are above average, it has for the last decade consumed a large number of pages in educational journals. During the decade of the eighties, school choice became a highly discussed possibility for reforming and restructuring American education. After the National Commission on Excellence in Education released *A Nation At Risk* on April 26, 1983 a number of reports followed on the condition of American education. The perceived condition of America's schools made it politically important to appear supportive of educational excellence.

Choice as an Educational Option

The national debate about excellence in education has involved national, state and local leaders. From the White House to the state house; from administrators to teachers; from school board members to individual citizens, the topic of school choice has provided both hope and concern.

The issues of choice have been around since the mid-fifties, when Milton Friedman suggested a plan for educational renewal, using a

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voucher system. The voucher, tuition tax credits and parental choice have been expressed in various forms for almost thirty-five years.

The U. S. Department of Education, under the leadership of Lamar Alexander, proposed a new choice plan called the "GI Bill for Children." Under that plan a child could qualify for a one thousand dollar scholarship to attend a school of their choice. One half of the scholarship could be used for supplementary academic services. The estimated cost of the proposal for FY 1993 is five hundred million dollars.

Choice has often been presented as an acceptable option within the educational excellence movement (Raywid, 1987a, p. 767). Not everyone supports choice as a panacea for educational excellence. Lieberman (1989) stated: "In short, 'choice' per se is hardly more than a slogan" (p. 236). Choice has continued to be widely discussed as an educational option, within the pages of educational journals. During that process the concept of parental choice of schools has gained both supporters and detractors.

Support for Choice

Presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush are among the most enthusiastic supporters of choice (Raywid 1987b, p. 25). Rudy Perpich of Minnesota provided the leadership while serving as the chairman of the Education Commission of the States [ECS]. The ECS encouraged choice as a way to cure the perceived evils of American public education (Pearson 1989, p. 821). Nathan (1989) stated that choice was an idea with great

popular appeal (p. 28). Nathan (1987) also concluded that policy makers would continue to expand parental choice in education (p. 750).

Many of the state governors appear to have concluded that choice may be a political asset. Choice was the theme in written reports of the National Governors' Association. A task force on choice was one of seven established by the Governors' Association. Richard D. Lamm, Governor of Colorado, served as the chairman of the Task Force on Parental Involvement and Choice. The recommendations of that task force were reported in *Time for Results: The Governor's 1991 Report on Education.* The report concluded that educational excellence would improve with an increase in parental choice (National Governors' Association 1986, p. 67). That position was echoed in an article by Albert Quie (1987), former Minnesota Governor in an article entitled: "More 'Choice' is Key to Public-School Reform" (p. 1).

Leaders within the business community such as David Kearns, chairman and chief executive office of the Xerox Corporation. have continued to support the concept of choice (Kearns 1988, Kearns and Doyle 1988). Albert Shanker (1985), president of the American Federation of Teachers, has stated that students deserve the right to choose their school, although he only supports choice within public schools (p. 96).

Opposition to Choice

Is choice a viable option for educational reform? Will choice improve the quality of the American educational system? Not everyone is in

agreement as to the appropriate answer to those questions. For those who opposed choice, it appeared that the White House was using the issue of choice as a means for the administration to appear active in the educational reform movement while avoiding any real commitment to provide the necessary support for true reform. Likewise the critics see choice as an ideal vehicle, for the administration, to talk reform and yet avoid any financial commitment to America's schools. A number of educational leaders have contended that parental choice of schools is a local issue with state implications.

Critics contend that implementation of choice would require little financial commitment on the part of the federal government. Some, like Chubb and Moe (1990), support choice but not the necessity of additional funding. They concluded that the ability of public education to perform has nothing to do with inadequate funding (p. 194). Ed Foglia (1989), president of the California Teachers Association, has expressed concern about states offering choice to parents rather than providing for adequate and equitable funding of schools.

> It would give public officials an excuse to claim - and the public reason to believe - that the problem has been solved: No more money is needed and no fundamental reform or restructuring is required. All students can get a good education. All they have to do is climb on a bus. Choice is no solution. Choice is a sham (p. 4).

Finch (1989) stated that research on choice continues to find that choice options are elected by parents more often for parental convenience than for academic opportunities (p. 31). Finch (1989) also presented a concern that choice options can work to lower academic achievement.

> In the Minnesota experience, geographic location especially location of day-care providers and parental convenience most often determine school selection. One central Minnesota school system, after raising graduation standards, found students were opting to leave and enroll in nearby school systems with lower graduation standards (p. 31).

Some critics indicate that choice leads to a concentration of at-risk students. Those students who do not have the academic ability to achieve nor the financial resources to afford the transportation can not elect a more academic school outside their neighborhood. Likewise, critics argue that money necessary for the survival and improvement of poor schools will be withdrawn under most of the choice options. Unfortunately choice may only create an illusion of fairness while, in reality, it may be increasing inequality among schools and students (Moore and Davenport 1989, p. 13, Pearson 1989, p. 821, Finch 1989, p. 32).

Chubb and Moe (1990) concluded that the way to solve those equity issues would be by allowing tax money to follow the student to the new school and provide the student with free transportation (p. 221). Kearns and Doyle (1988) support the concept of state money following a student. The proposed GI Bill for Children would provide a one thousand dollar scholarship for the student to take to the school of choice. Thus among the supporters of choice there is some support for financial resources to follow the child to the school of choice.

Gallup Poll on School Choice

The annual Gallup Poll on education, published each fall in the *Phi Delta Kappan*, continues to indicate that school choice is a popular concept among parents. Support for parental choice has experienced a strong endorsement among those Americans polled. Figure one indicates that about twice as many Americans polled support choice as those who are opposed.

Figure 1

Phi Delta Kappan Annual Poll
NATIONAL TOTALS ON SCHOOL CHOICE

For the last three years the Gallup Poll has asked: **"Do you favor or oppose allowing students and their parents to choose which public schools in this community the students attend, regardless of where they live?"**

	Favor	Oppose	Don't Know
21st poll [1989]	60	31	9
22nd poll [1990]	62	31	7
23rd poll [1991]	62	33	5

Source: Phi Delta Kappan, Volume 71, 72, 73; Issue number 1: "Annual Gallup Poll"

The placement of choice within the annual Gallup poll may be some indication of declining importance for the topic. Choice was the first topic in the 21st poll, but it moved to second place after "National Goals for Education" in the 22nd poll. Within the 23rd poll, choice followed seven other categories. Choice was not reported as a part of the 24th poll in 1992 (Elam and Gallup 1989, Elam 1990, Elam, Rose and Gallup 1991, Elam, Rose and Gallup 1992).

Choice in Educational Journals

The extent to which choice has become an issue within the educational community can be revealed by the number of articles and pages educational journals have given to the subject of choice. A search of *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* (January 1983 to November 23, 1991) revealed seventy-two articles on school choice. *Readers' Guide* is a general periodical index, which provides limited indexing of educational topics.

A search of ERIC indexing on the subject provided greater evidence about the number of articles and pages dedicated to choice within educational journals. The 12th edition (1990) of the *Thesaurus of ERIC Descriptors* indicated that school choice had been used as a descriptor since March 1982. The *Thesaurus* indicated that 171 articles and 179 educational documents were identified since 1982 using the descriptor of school choice. A search of ERIC (January 1982 - September 1991) revealed 525 items listed under school choice. In nine and three quarters years those 525 items provided an average of fifty-four entries a year within the ERIC indexing system.

School choice as an educational topic appears widely discussed in both ERIC documents and educational journals. The editors of a number of educational journals have given the topic a large number of pages.

Two hundred and sixty of the entries within the ERIC indexing system were articles in educational journals. The *Phi Delta Kappan* contained the most articles with thirty-six. Those articles contained 192 pages or an average of five and a quarter pages per article. *Equity and Choice* had the second highest number of articles with thirty-one, containing 169 pages with an average of almost five and a half pages per article. *Educational Leadership* contained the third highest number of articles at twenty-three. Those articles covered eighty-six pages with an average of three and three quarters pages per article. *Education and Urban Society* was fourth in the number of articles. Those fourteen articles contained 182 pages with an average of thirteen pages per article. Thus four educational journals, alone, have dedicated 609 pages in 104 articles during a ten year period to the subject of choice.

A check of the dates of publication, for all 260 articles listed in *Current Index to Journals in Education* [ERIC], revealed that the greatest number of those articles appeared in the late eighties, although the number remained near average for 1990 and 1991. A total of almost twenty-two hundred pages were consumed on the subject within educational journals, indexed in ERIC. Figure two provides yearly information about the number of articles and pages dedicated to the topic of choice.

Figure 2

Articles in Educational Journals Indexed in
Current Index to Journals in Education (1982-September 1991)
n=260 Average per year=26.7

Year	Number of Articles	Number of Pages/Year	Average Number of pages/Article
1981	6	45	7.5
1982	21	188	10.4
1983	11	112	10.2
1984	11	101	9.2
1985	17	115	6.8
1986	28	246	8.8
1987	36	286	7.9
1988	25	274	11
1989	44	293	6.7
1990	25	297	11.9
1991	36	238	6.6
TOTAL	**260**	**2195**	**8.4**

Choice May be Only a Popular Slogan

Does choice deserve the coverage it is receiving within educational journals? There appears to be insufficient evidence that choice will improve education. Research continues to indicate that parental choice options are most often elected for convenience and not for academic opportunities. Some researchers continue to be concerned that choice may complicate the

already desperate situation of equity of funding. If, as Ed Foglia, has stated, "choice is a sham," why has the topic taken up valuable pages of educational journals and continued as a discussion item? Choice may be only a popular slogan with little impact upon how education is delivered. Maybe it is time to discuss options that have a greater chance of providing renewal for the American educational system. Oh, for Lake Wobegon, where school choice is not discussed.

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